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ABSTRACT

A study proposing reality and fantasy discrimination of television content as a classificatory ability sought to identify differences between subjects who were able to make sophisticated reality-fantasy judgements and those who were not, and factors which might contribute to a subject's sophistication in discrimination. Open-ended and structured interviews were conducted with 36 children in grades one, three, and six; these interviews were scored and ranked according to the subject's sophistication with and tendency to use reality and fantasy concepts, sophistication in understanding the commercial broadcast television system, and degree of program familiarity. Results indicated that high scorers in reality-fantasy judgements were distinguished from their less sophisticated grade peers by their increased spontaneous use of reality-fantasy considerations. Also, the ability to assess the reality status of various types of television was relatively independent of the child's familiarity with a variety of television programs. The findings imply that efforts to teach children about the medium of television and its conventions could improve their skills in discriminating reality from fiction on television. (CMV)

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Exploring the Realities of Television with Children*

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Exploring the Realities of Television with Children

Introduction

In judging the "degree of reality" of a televised segment, an adult viewer relies upon a complex set of criteria. These criteria focus on different dimensions of a given segment, yielding, in some cases, diverse decisions about a single program. For example, a program may be unreal with respect to its manner of production (e.g., animation), yet real with respect to its psychological or historical components. Alternatively, a situation comedy may be judged real in the sense in which a cartoon is not real: It presents real people. Yet it may be judged unreal due to its psychological implausibility.

It seems clear, then, that competent viewers of the medium have mastered a complex set of evaluative procedures with which to make judgments about the reality of TV programs. Yet neither the actual criteria used in making such decisions, nor the steps through which children

must pass in order to acquire these criteria, have been much explored.

Children's judgments about the perceived reality of television have been a matter of concern to several researchers. Their studies, however, have focused mainly on the degree of perceived reality ascribed to television as a possible explanation for television's effects on learning and behavior. For instance, such studies have examined children's judgments of reality as a potential variable affecting children's level of involvement with television content,[1] their aggressive behaviors,[2] and their social attitudes and behaviors.[3] Other investigators,[4] have interviewed children directly about the credibility they ascribe to television.

In a line of research closer to the present inquiry, Greenberg and Reeves[5] examined several variables which may influence how children assess the reality of television presentations. As with other studies in this tradition, however, children's judgments about the <u>degree</u> of perceived reality were assessed as the dependent variable; the findings demonstrated that perceptions of the reality of television are positively related to the increased specificity of content, increased interpersonal communication about television and increased television usage. Additionally, IQ and age were found to be negatively related to perceived reality of television, thus indicating that, at higher levels of development, children are more discriminating about the reality of materials presented on television.

The present study approaches reality and fantasy discrimination as a classificatory ability;[6] thus it focuses on how children arrive at such beliefs, the reasons they supply for their judgments, and the extent to which reality (and fantasy) function as a meaningful dimension for assessing television. The resulting portrait should bring research on children's assessment of "levels of reality" into closer contact with findings on their general cognitive growth.

The Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, information was sought on the differences between subjects who were able to make sophisticated reality-fantasy judgments and those who were not. Such information would illuminate both the criteria used by sophisticated subjects and the steps through which children must presumably pass as they gain in sophistication. Second, the study focused on factors which might contribute to a subject's sophistication in discriminating reality from fantasy. Of particular interest here was the identification of factors other than age which might contribute to the acquisition of this capacity.

Two factors seemed important. The first was a willingness to compare television to the "real" world and to reason about what was possible. The second was an understanding of how and why television programs are put

together, e.g., editing techniques, commercial sponsorship, script writers.

It was hypothesized that only a limited grasp of television would result from the use of one of these components without the other. For example, if children made decisions based exclusively on the manner in which television programs were put together, they might dismiss all acted programs and assign the same degree of reality to a historical drama and a soap opera. On the other hand, if children made decisions only by comparing programming to the real world, they would have no basis upon which to judge topics foreign to their experience; a documentary about South America and a science fiction adventure might be perceived as equally fantastic. Thus, a combination of these competencies seemed the best preparation for accurately judging new TV programs.

Further, it was hypothesized that the development of competence with discriminations of reality would be related to the child's familiarity with

television. As one possibility, high exposure to many different programs might, by posing the issue in a variety of forms, serve to clarify many reality issues; each hour in front of the television may provide another opportunity to develop skepticism and discriminatory abilities. As an alternate hypothesis, high exposure to a variety of contemporary television fare, with all of its technological tricks, may confuse a child about the difference between fantasy and reality.

Information was secured by conducting lengthy clinical interviews with each subject. Following the procedure devised initially by Piaget[7] the interviews were carried out in an open-ended fashion. This exploratory procedure allowed the experimenter to pursue promising topics of discussion initiated by the children and assured the accumulation of detailed information. However, at the same time, a set of standardized questions was posed to all subjects, thereby assuring that valid comparisons could be made with reference to the specific issues posed: the children's use of reality and fantasy in their judgments about television, the extent of their knowledge about the way the television medium works, and their degree of familiarity with diverse television content.

The Interview

The interview began with a set of questions which examined subjects' viewing preferences and habits. The major portion of the interview

involved watching and discussing a videotape consisting of segments of twelve different programs taped directly off the air. These segments were selected to represent the range of programming which television presents and to reflect varying hypothesized levels of reality (e.g., news, game show, historical drama, situation comedy, cartoon).[8]

The questions in the interview were of three types. First, there were open-ended questions which provided children the opportunity to talk spontaneously about television and focus on whatever dimension they might choose. Thus, for example, for each segment children were asked what "kind" of program had been shown and what usually happens on such a program. The second group of questions were those which directly probed the child's understanding of the way television works. These asked for the child's interpretation of phenomena commonly seen on television (e.g., acting credits, commercials). Finally, a number of more structured questions were designed to encourage reality-fantasy considerations without explicitly suggesting them.

These structured questions, posed in the form of contrasts, implicit dilemmas to be solved, or sorting tasks (see Table I for examples), could be interpreted differently by individuals; in fact, it was only on the final sorting task of the interview (for which children were asked to put pictures of six programs into "real" and "not real" groups) that the experimenter herself introduced the term "real." Thus, despite ample opportunity to do so, it was possible for a child to proceed through the major portion of the interview without ever mentioning reality-fantasy issues.

Interviews were conducted with thirty-six children, 18 males and 18 females,

twelve in each of the first, third and sixth grades. Children were seen individually during the school day in a quiet room. All subjects attended the same school in a working class, multi-ethnic community in the Boston area.

Scoring

A rating scale was devised to assess a subject's sophistication with, and tendency to use reality and fantasy concepts. All subjects were given a number of opportunities to use reality-fantasy distinctions; moreover, questions designed to elicit such responses were posed systematically to all subjects. As a result, subjects' answers to fourteen such questions could be rated for the presence of "reality-based" explanations. These questions varied in the degree to which they explicitly probed for such answers; thus it would be expected that certain of the questions ("Do the three stooges get hurt?") would more readily elicit reality-fantasy responses than others ("Is 'Sonny and Cher' more like the news or 'Bewitched'?"). For each question the highest number of points was achieved by an explicit reality-fantasy explanation; fewer points were received for implicit or unclear reality-fantasy explanations; no points were given for no reference. Scoring reliability of 84% agreement between two independent judges was achieved on a large subset of the protocols.

A second rating scale, designed in a similar manner, was used to assess subjects' relative sophistication in understanding the structure of our television system and the way in which the medium works. Answers to five questions were rated; these questions asked the child to explain some convention on television (e.g., "What does it mean when they say 'this program was brought to you by Kellogg's Corn Flakes'"?). In this case, the maximum

number of points was received by an answer which was competent and supplied some additional information not explicitly requested. The next score (one less than maximum) was given for an answer that was correct or adequate. Reliability on this "television concepts" scale, as assessed by two independent judges, was 85% on a large subset of protocols.

Finally, subjects were also ranked on their degree of familiarity with television. In the course of the interview, children were asked to identify eighteen programs by name; the degree of familiarity was assessed by the total number of correct identifications. Strict criteria were used to designate an identification as correct; although subjects did not have to produce the exact program name, they had to supply enough other information (e.g., character names) to assure that they were familiar with the specific program under discussion. This method of assessing familiarity was adopted rather than self-reports of amount of television viewing, inasmuch as the latter index has often proved unreliable.

Table 1 about here

Results

Rank-orderings of subjects by their total scores on the reality-fantasy dimension, and on their knowledge of the workings of the media, revealed definite patterns of response. In each case, the types of responses typically elicited from individuals with high sophistication, will be provided and contrasted with the types of responses characteristic of individuals with little or no sophistication. Following this description, the specific correlations between age, knowledge of television

concepts, familiarity with television, and sophistication of reality-fantasy understanding will be reported.

Turning first to an examination of subjects' total scores on the scale of reality-fantasy judgments, a wide range of sophistication was found both within and across grades. Subjects' scores on this scale ranged from 0 to 26 points; the maximum score possible was 29. Generally, high scorers (i.e., subjects who ranked in the top third) were distinguished from their less sophisticated peers by their increased spontaneous use of reality-fantasy considerations. (For examples of answers given by subjects at different sophistication levels see Table I.) These subjects would often invoke an explicit reality-based explanation even on the questions which were not specifically designed to elicit such discussion as well as those questions which constituted relatively subtle probes for such discussion. Thus, for example, one high scoring subject, when asked what kind of show Bewitched is, responded immediately with a reality judgment, "It's not factual."

In contrast, the subjects scoring in either the middle or lower range of the reality-fantasy scale rarely demonstrated such a salient concern for reality. Rather, they tended to sort and contrast programs in terms of affect (e.g., "The Mike Douglas Show" is like the news because "it is not funny") and specific content (e.g., "Mike Douglas" is like the news because "it has words on the walls").

Low-scoring subjects often seemed totally unaware of reality-fantasy issues, even on the more explicit probes for such discussion. These subjects received relatively few points at all; in fact, the scores of the twelve subjects ranked in the bottom third ranged from 0 to 5 points.

These low ranked subjects typically failed to recognize, for example, that the appropriateness of an event on "Kotter" as a news item depends on its factual truth. In fact most low ranking subjects saw no problem with the hypothetical "Kotter" fire being on the news. After all, they reasoned, fires are sometimes on the news.

Middle ranked subjects differed significantly from the least sophisticated viewers in their responses to the more explicit probes, notably in response to the implicit dilemmas. Thus, once the issue of factuality was suggested to these subjects, they seemed able to recognize and discuss issues of reality and fantasy. Indeed, these middle-range subjects seem to be in transition. Unlike those more sophisticated, these subjects seem to have reality-fantasy criteria less spontaneously available to them; however, when a question requiring the use of such criteria is posed, they evince some understanding of the complexity of the problem.

Turning next to the measure of children's understanding of the television medium, a wide range of sophistication was also found with scores ranging from 0 to 21 out of a possible 22. This scale represents a relatively more specific measure of the amount and accuracy of a child's knowledge of a designated content area. In this case, then, a high score generally signals a difference in degree of understanding.

The following examples of several subjects' answers to the same question illustrate the distinction between the levels of sophistication on this scale. One of the questions asked for an explanation of the phrase "This program was filmed before a live studio audience."
One high ranking subject explained

that the show was filmed in front of a live audience and they tell you that so you know that they couldn't film different parts on different days, and "you know that there is no mirrors or camera tricks or anything." Middle-range subjects typically understood that an audience was present when the show was being made, but they couldn't explain why that fact might be of interest to viewers. Subjects with low scores on the television concepts scale typically either couldn't offer any explanation, or their answers betrayed a misconception. For example, one first grader said, "That program was made before real people came."

These general developmental levels were then examined in terms of the factors which may have engendered them. First, as an indicator of developmental stage, subjects were examined by grade; it was determined that, in general, sophistication with reality-fantasy correlated with age. Out of a possible score of 29, the mean score for the first grade was 4.25, for the third grade, 8.3 and for the sixth grade, 17.6. However, a rank-ordering of subjects across grades revealed a fair degree of inter-grade overlap, suggesting that the development of sophistication may be affected by factors other than chronological age. Among the 15 subjects who scored above the overall mean of 10.1 were 10 sixth graders, four third graders and one first grader. Furthermore, the performance of the poorest sixth grader was topped by half the third graders and two first graders. Similarly, one first grader scored higher than ten third graders and two sixth graders.

Children's understanding of television concepts also increased with age. Out of a total possible score of 22, the mean scores on this scale were 3.5 for the first grade, 7.4 for the third grade, and 13.3 for the sixth grade.

Next, the factors of understanding of television concepts and familiarity

with television were examined for their possible contributions to reality-fantasy sophistication. To explore these possible relationships, a series of Spearman rank-order correlations were performed for each grade. A similar correlation was also done to examine the relationship between understanding of television concepts and familiarity with television.

The correlations between reality-fantasy sophistication and understanding of television concepts were both positive and significant for first and third graders (.635 and .624, respectively, $p < .05$). Sixth graders had a positive but insignificant correlation. Although both abilities would predictably be influenced by general level of intelligence, this finding indicates that children who are more cognizant of reality-fantasy issues also understand more about the structure and operation of television. This finding supports the original hypothesis that one of the components necessary for a competent understanding of reality-fantasy distinctions is a certain amount of technical knowledge of television. In contrast, correlations between reality-fantasy sophistication and familiarity with television were very close to zero for all grades. This finding indicates that the ability to assess the reality status of various types of television is relatively independent of the child's familiarity with a variety of television programs, and, possibly, independent also of the amount of television watched.

This latter finding is probably most valid for the first graders who showed the greatest variability in their abilities to recognize and remember television programs; indeed the most sophisticated first grader with regard to reality-fantasy could only identify seven of the eighteen programs, while one of the

lowest ranked subjects identified twice as many. The validity of correct identification as a measure of familiarity becomes more questionable for the third and sixth grade subjects; these older children seemed better at identifying programs even if they had never seen them or had only seen them once. Thus the range of correct identifications varied across grades; first graders made from 2-15 correct identifications, third graders from 14-17 and sixth graders ranged from 13-18 correct.

Discussion

This lack of relationship between a child's familiarity with television (a possible index of amount of viewing) and understanding of reality-fantasy concepts seems to refute both of the competing original hypotheses. Degree of familiarity, per se, seems not to play a significant role in either clarifying or confusing one's notions of reality and fantasy. This finding suggests that the search for the factors which influence reality-fantasy sophistication needs to be extended in directions other than familiarity with television fare.

The final correlations, between familiarity with television and understanding of television concepts, were also close to zero. This finding suggests, first, that a child need not be familiar with a vast array of programs in order to understand how television works and, second, that children can be familiar with many television programs without ever knowing much about how television works. However, it has also been shown that without such knowledge they are probably less able to make discriminations between reality and fantasy.

From all indications, gaining sophistication in making reality-fantasy

distinctions is a complex process which in most cases takes several years to unfold. While it appears that age (or developmental stage) clearly increases the likelihood of a sophisticated response, other factors also make their contribution. Indeed, knowledge of the television medium seems very important in the achievement of sophistication; such knowledge may exceed the sheer effects of watching a variety of programs, which proved difficult to document in the present study. It appears, then, that a set of explanatory concepts is much more useful than mere familiarity with a phenomenon. The findings also imply that efforts to teach children about the medium of television and its conventions could facilitate their abilities to discriminate reality from fiction on television.

Notes

1. H.T. Himmelweit, A.N. Oppenheim, and P. Vince, Television and the Child (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

2. S. Feshbach, "Reality and Fantasy in Filmed Violence," in Television and Social Behavior (Vol. 2) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

3. A.D. Leifer, "Factors which Predict the Credibility Ascribed to Television," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, September 5, 1976.

4. J. Lyle, and H.R. Hoffman, "Explorations in Patterns of Television Viewing by Preschool-Age Children," in Television and Social Behavior (Vol. 4) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972); L. Streicher, and R. Endsley, "Children's Emotional and Cognitive Reactions to Television Violence: Effects of Film Character, Reassurance, Age and Sex," paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Denver, April 1975).

5. B.S. Greenberg, and B. Reeves, "Children and the Perceived Reality of Television," Journal of Social Issues, 32:4:86-97 (fall, 1976).

6. P. Morison, and H. Gardner, "Dragons and Dinosaurs: The Child's Capacity to Differentiate Fantasy from Reality," Child Development, 49:3:642-648 (1978).

7. J. Piaget, The Child's Conception of the World (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1929).

8. The television segments shown on the videotape were from: "Bewitched," "Sonny and Cher," "Mike Douglas," "Emergency," "Star Trek," "Jacques Cousteau," "The Waltons," "Welcome Back Kotter," "The Adams Chronicles," a news broadcast, a cartoon, and a Cat Chow commercial.

Table I

Sample Responses from Subjects of Varying Sophistication on the Reality-Fantasy Scale

Type of Subject	Contrast Questions		Implicit Dilemma Question
	"Is 'Mike Douglas' more like 'Bewitched' or the news?"	"Is 'Star Trek' the same kind of show as 'Jacques Cousteau'?"	"On 'Welcome Back Kotter', if they had a fire at their school would that be on the news?"
High Scorer (Score=23)	News-"Because it is telling facts about the other people and what they did."	"No, because 'Star Trek' is fiction. We haven't even gotten up to that time and we don't even know what's going to happen then."	"Is the fire supposed to happen?...Like if they wanted it to happen. (Who?) The producers. (If they did want it to happen, would it be on the news?) No, because it is just for a show and they have something to flame it down."
Middle Scorer (Score=12)	News-"Because they talk about things and the news talks about things."	"No, because they don't do anything magic or something like that. It's all real."	"Well, if it was a real fire it would. But I don't think it would be a real fire... Cuz they shouldn't have a real fire."
Middle Scorer (Score=9)	News-"Because they tell things that happened to them and things like that."	"Not really. Because 'Jacques Cousteau' is exploring things... on 'Star Trek' they are in space and things happen to them."	"Not on the show...If the school was really on fire it would be on the news. But on the show it probably wouldn't be on the news."
Low Scorer (Score=4)	"Bewitched"-"Because it has exciting things. They're good. I like that show a lot."	"No, because the 'Star Trek' people don't go under the sea."	"I don't think Mr. Kotter would but the fire would. I think he is too funny for the news."
Low Scorer (Score=0)	News-"Because it has words on the walls."	"No, because it has water in it and 'Star Trek' doesn't."	"No, because they don't have any uniforms for the news."